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ABSTRACT

An analysis of "Century" magazine from November 1919 to April 1920 reveals that women were most likely to be characters in a short story or serialized novels. The stereotypic portrayal of the American female in the nonfiction pieces as "schoolmarm," "silly school girl," or "wife/mother" seems strange when one considers that "Century" was consciously addressing itself to current social, political, economic, and cultural issues. The magazine failed to feature even a short article on the women's suffrage movement. Most of the articles were of interest to both men and women, but none was of interest primarily to women. "Century" did not slight women writers, however--at least not short story writers and poets. But even the women writers portrayed women as romantic, "ideal" women and those characters that failed to conform to that ideal found only unhappiness. Fortunately, some of the characters challenged the ideal and images, proving that women could stand alone and like it and could occasionally break through social and moral conventions without being punished. Perhaps the editor of "Century" deserves the benefit of the doubt in the suggestion that he fostered an image of women as being as interested as men in the adventures and events of the day. (HTH)

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BEYOND THE GENTEEL TRADITION? IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE 1919 VOLUME OF CENTURY

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A year ago last summer I participated in an NEH Seminar of "The Images of Women in American Literature 1870-1920." This paper is an outgrowth of some of the research I did at that time. One of our tasks was to closely examine one year's Volume of Harper's the Atlantic Monthly, or the Century. The following analysis concentrates on the ninetyninth volume of CENTURY (November 1919-April 1920).

If you are looking for the woman, particularly the American woman, in the pages of the ninetyninth volume of Century (November 1919 -- April 1920) or any of the other volumes of the above mentioned magazines, you are more likely to find her as the heroine in a short story or the serialized novel A Servant of Reality than as the subject of an essay. About the closest you can come is "Women of France" (complete with sketches), an enconium extolling the French woman's courage, self-sacrifice, fidelity, and hard work during the war. Glancing through other articles, particularly the local color sketches and travelogs, you can catch glimpses of other women. Take Charles S. Brooks' reminiscences about his childhood in a small town, "A Corner for Echoes." Here you will find the young woman assistant in Conrad's Bookstore who "read the Duchess between customers...[and who] in her fancy ... eloped daily with a duke, but actually kept company with a grocer's clerk. They ate sodas together at Tinkey's. How could he know, poor fellow, when their fingers met beneath the table, that he was but a substitute in her high romance." In "Our Country Town," set in Upper New York State, you'll discover that the Doctor's

daughters "set the fashion," that Aunt Amelia is a "sentimental schoolma'm," and that the girls in the finishing school "were guarded from the advances of the young gentlemen of the academy," but that they did flirt with them in church. Going further west and south to an Italian settlement in Arkansas you'll not be surprised to learn that the women were "presiding over large broods and distributing among their young ... advice, slaps, and nourishment." If you read Harry A. Franck's "Sketches of Cuba: West to East," you'll find that the Italian woman's Latin cousin, though more of a lady especially when she gets dressed in her grande toilette for one of her rare, brief appearances on the street, is also absorbed in her family. Her "sphere is strictly behind the grill of the front window... . The result is that her interest in and beyond her household is virtually nil. Although Franck notes that the "Woman Suffrage Party of Cuba" is active in Cuba, it receives little support from Cuban women, a situation which disturbed some of their militant Anglo-Saxon sisters to the North who were in the midst of their crusade to secure voting rights for women.

Should you be more interested in biography, you can become involved in the seven-part serialization of the "Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier," Canada's Prime Minister from 1896-1911. You'll learn that he was happily married for fifty years, but you'll find that women were not involved in Canadian politics.

It seems strange indeed that the portraits of American women and girls embedded in the non-fiction pieces in this volume should be limited to the traditional images of the "schoolmarm," the

romantic bookstore assistant, the giggly, silly school girl, or the wife-mother, and ignore that of the "emancipated" woman which Frank obliquely refers to in his article on Cuba. That the subject of Woman Suffrage is not the major focus for a single, even short article during this period is even stranger, particularly when one considers that the Century is consciously addressing itself to current social, political, economic, and cultural issues.

As a matter of fact, Glenn Frank's "Tide of Affairs: Comment on the Times" which appeared regularly was specifically designed to accomplish that purpose. These well-written, interesting, brief essays range over many aspects of American and European life of interest to the American public: prohibition, the 1920 political campaign. The Congress to the International Labor Conference, the rebuilding of Europe, the poetry and politics of Gabriele D'Annunzio, the dramas of Maurice Maeterlinck, and strikes.

Understandably many of the major articles in the volume deal with various aspects of the war and its aftermath, a subject undoubtedly of interest to the educated middle class, both men and women, who comprised the readership of the Century. That they are also interested in social issues is evidenced by the inclusion of articles such as "A Voice and a Vote in the Factory" about unionization. "A Clash of Color: The Negro in American Democracy" described by the magazine's editor as "one of a series of articles Mr. Frank is contributing to the Century on post-war problems." Insofar as prohibition is a "woman's issue" because of its close

identification with the W.C.T.U., "The Strayed Prohibitionist" appears to be an exception. That is till one reads it. This charmingly ironic, gently mocking piece by Agnes Reppelier follows "the path of the imaginary prohibition-bred American youth (not of this generation, but the next) straying through the wine-drenched and ale-drenched pages of English literature."

Certainly most of these articles are of interest to both men and women, but one cannot help but notice that none are of interest primarily to women. Might the readers not be just as interested in a biographical series on someone like Susan B. Anthony as they were in the life of Canadian Prime Minister Sir Laurier?

If the Century slights woman as subject, it does not slight women writers, at least not short story writers and poets.

Three of the non-fiction pieces are written by women: "The Reality of Korea," the previously mentioned "The Strayed Prohibitionist," and a delightful, slightly sentimental description of the first post-war Christmas in Paris, "The Peace Christmas," by journalist-author Helen Davenport Gibbons. By contrast in the literature field, more than half of the two dozen stories in the canon, the serialized novel, as well as almost half of the poems are authored by women. Not only do women write fiction, they also appear more frequently and prominently in these stories. But how are they imaged? Only eight years earlier, in 1911, George Santayana in a lecture at the University of California at Berkeley had coined the phrase,"Genteel tradition," a phrase critics immediately appropriated. In that lecture, Santayana contended that

> ...one half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs has remained I will not say high and dry, but slightly becalmed; it has floated gently in the back-water; while alongside in invention and industry and social organization the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara rapids. ... The one is the sphere of the American man; the other at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.

Does this statement hold true for us? Unquestionably, the most frequently encountered image of woman in these stories is the romantic, "ideal" woman: she is beautiful, honest, generous, sensitive, loving, warm and understanding. If she meets most of these requirements, she will live happily ever after; if she does not, she will be unhappy.

For instance, in four of the stories, the woman's failure to conform to this ideal leads to unhappiness. In "And She Could Never Understand" Mildred's marriage breaks up because she is unkind and insensitive. She is callous about Miss Peletier's death, she disparages a pupil's gift, and she embarrasses Julius (her fiancée) in front of others. She could be Louise, the girl Richard has married in 'Closed Gentians." Louise is coarse, vain, self-centered, and spoiled, particularly in comparison to Sylvia with whom Richard, despite his protestations, is still in love. In "Lowry" the narrator though very much taken by the beautiful widow of the admiral, Hilda Neilson, decides against asking her to marry him because he detected a "coldness" and pride in her he had not suspected. And in Joseph Hergesheimer's "Read Them and Weep" the fickle, selfish Annie McKee ends up marrying the cad Sam Fids rather than the more upright and honest Jackson Carmenon.

Yet, some of the stories challenge these ideals and images. Several heroines can stand alone and like it. In "My Diogenes Night," the protagonist is an individualist. She is in love, not with a man, but with a house. When to her dismay she finds that the builders have locked it, she spends the night in a fisherman's tug. As she approaches the house she is enraptured" "What a night! A glow of happiness came over me at the thought of that house waiting for me on the dune, with all the wonderful nights to come in its keeping, the rich twilights, the stars, the dawns, the midnight beat and drift of storms."

Another individualist is Sylvia in "Closed Gentians." She has successfully avoided marrying Richard, and when he finally, after several years marries someone else, Sylvia experiences a new sense of freedom: freedom from the responsibility for someone else's happiness. She can live alone because she receives more pleasure from communing with nature than from being in the company of people. As Richard expresses it,: "She always looks for beauty and always finds it. In herself or in the rest of us. ...She is the spirit of spring, of growth, as glad and as impersonal as nature. She is youth;...she quickens the pulse of life."

Though differing from Sylvia in most ways, Emily in "The Yielded Torch" also exults in here newly-found freedom. When her father, Isaac, Millford's most prominent citizen, who had expected his daughter to be "on call all day long to do this or that for him, to drudge for him," dies, Emily recognizes that she had been denied her woman's birthright. She ecstatically repeats: I'm free! I'm free! And I'm only thirty-five! I'm only thirty-five."

Similarly, Nancy Cleaves, escapes from her father in "The Tyrant." But her escape is much more traditional. Thomas Batson, the hired hand recognizes her goodness and marries her, despite the portwine mark on her face which her father had hoped would make her undesirable to the lads in the village so that she'd continue to be his "slave."

Neither of the above protagonists fully conforms to the ideal posited earlier: one because of her age, the other because of her plainness. A third is the self-reliant heroine of "Scheherazade of the Factory." Not only is she an immigrant and works in a factory, but she also, after her father's death, "had to be man of the family" while her mother ran the house and raised the children. Nevertheless, in typical fashion the narrator concludes this delightful fictional biography of the hard-working, compassionate, immigrant-girl with the hope that "Scheherezade will have all the things she wants in life, [and] that there is a soldier coming home from the wars for her particularly... ." Although certainly most of the women in many ways conform to the "ideal," yet there is considerable evidence that the image of woman is beginning to change. Kitty the heroine of the highly romantic main character in A Servant of Reality, a serialized novel by Phyllis Bottome, illustrates this point. In many ways, Kitty is the typical, traditional, romantic nineteenth century heroine, reminiscent of Camille in Dumas fils' drama of the same name. Yet she is assertive, independent, unafraid of breaking established conventions of behavior and dress when it suits her, and intensly alive. We first meet her when she unexpectedly bursts into the room at Rochetts;

(an English country home) while her friend Daphne, Daphne's brother Anthony, and Ruth, whom Daphne hopes her brother will fall in love with and marry, are having tea.

> And then the door opened, and Kitty came in. She did not wait to be announced as "Miss Costrelle." She simply threw a long, blue chiffon scarf on a chair followed by a gold hand-bag and a perfectly insufficient umbrella with a jeweled handle; then she embraced Daphne.
>
> "I know I ought n't to have come," she said apologetically, for the only welcome Daphne gave her was to say reproachfully, "O Kitty! Kitty!"
>
> "It was only tea. I literally was dying for some on the doorstep, and the next house was miles off and full of women who hate me like poison, and won't say so except when they think I'm looking the other way. An I thought you dould n't like Jimmy to find me just dead on the mat. It would make him think you such a bad housekeeper.
>
> "This is your brother, is n't it? I've met Miss Mellicot before, I believe. I'm awfully afraid of her. You are the one who went to Girton, are n't you? I can't think why Daphne has such awfully clever friends; she is n't a bit clever herself, really, is she, Captain Arden? Of course I know you are, but men don't matter. One is n't afraid of their cleverness."

Romantic? Yes. The Ideal? Maybe.

Our search for the woman in the pages of volume ninetynine of the Century is over, and not surprisingly we have discovered not the woman but many women. This idealized ideal creature is not so very different from her mother and grandmother; she is still beautiful, alluring, sensitive, caring, faithful, and trustworthy. However, she is permitted more individuality and more freedom of action. She can be complete without a man, she can occasionally break through social and moral conventions without being punished, and she can assert her independence, now and then. While most of the illustrations accompanying these stories depict beautiful girls and handsome men, clearly descendents of the Gibson girl and the

Gibson man, we have at least one unattractive herione. Even though the pages of the Century reveal some glaring omissions in the non-fiction field, maybe we should give the editor the benefit of the doubt by suggesting that he imaged women as being as interested as men in the affairs of the day and in African adventures.